

Kevin Giles, *Star Tribune*

Critics say a \$690 million, four-lane span would carry traffic to a once-booming area in western Wisconsin where growth now has screeched to a near-halt.

A 10-year growth spurt in Wisconsin's St. Croix County, heralded as a principal reason for building a \$690 million four-lane St. Croix River bridge for mounting interstate traffic, has skidded to a stop.

As a decades-long debate pitting environmental groups against government agencies and even neighbor against neighbor again heats up --and political heavyweights from Minnesota, Wisconsin and Washington weigh in -- some are calling for a fresh look into the future needs of the area.

The portion of the county that a new bridge would serve is being slammed with a record number of tax delinquencies, most in new housing areas in the New Richmond and Somerset areas. Sheriff sales of foreclosed properties have soared. Building permits have dwindled.

And there's more: Declining home values, wallet-emptying gasoline prices, changing work habits and a general metrowide pullback from exurban sprawl have, in many people's minds, altered assumptions that for decades steered planners on a course for a bigger bridge to replace the 80-year-old Stillwater Lift Bridge.

"I think they have to question whether the paradigm we saw for 30 years is going to carry forward in the future," said Clarence "Buck" Malick, longtime member of the St. Croix County Board. "That paradigm was that tens of thousands of Minnesotans would move to Wisconsin over several years. There seems to be reason to question that now."

Just how the next two decades will play out remains a matter of speculation.

"Nobody's got a projection," said David Fodroczi, the county's planning manager. "Frankly, that's the same wild card for the whole metropolitan area. The motivation for people who want to live here will continue. The question is what it will take to do that."

Adam Josephson, east metro manager for the Minnesota Department of Transportation, acknowledges the economic slide in Wisconsin but remains firm in his support for a bigger bridge. "The needs for a four-lane bridge are already there so if you have any kind of growth trend it will only add to those needs," he said.

St. Croix County's population across the river from Stillwater remains rural by metro standards. The largest city is New Richmond, which is about 40 miles from St. Paul and has fewer than 8,500 residents.

Census projections through 2030 show most of St. Croix County's growth won't occur in the vicinity of a new bridge but farther south along Interstate 94.

The New Richmond and Somerset areas combined would gain fewer than 11,000 residents over 20 years, according to the latest estimates. By comparison, the city of Hudson and adjoining Town of Hudson on I-94 would gain more than twice as many.

About 18,000 vehicles currently cross the Lift Bridge each day, while five times that many -- about 90,000 -- cross the I-94 bridge at Hudson, six miles south.

A fresh look

Changing circumstances warrant a fresh look at a more affordable bridge, said Adeel Lari, a former MnDOT highway engineer who years ago helped acquire land in Oak Park Heights for the project. A three-lane bridge with two lanes dedicated to peak-hour traffic in a single direction would make better sense, he said.

"I think we need to look at the reality. People are not driving as far or as often," said Lari, now a transportation fellow at the University of Minnesota. Because of advances in technology, more people are shopping online and doing their jobs from home with computers and cellphones, he said.

"Traffic projected to be commuting from such distances is working with models of yesterday," said Bill Pappas, a Stillwater resident and longtime critic of the current plan. "Suburban expansion that relies on long auto commutes with escalating gas prices and very expensive infrastructure expansion is not a sure thing in today's revenue-challenged development models."

In a recent hearing, U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., told a House subcommittee that traffic on a new St. Croix bridge would swell to 48,000 vehicles a day by 2030. That number was taken from a MnDOT report at the height of the housing boom in 2005. Traffic on the two-lane Lift Bridge, meanwhile, has pretty much been unchanged in recent years.

Spokeswoman Becky Rogness said Bachmann remains in support of a four-lane bridge "because it doesn't make sense to build a smaller bridge that will be obsolete before construction even begins."

In contrast, Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., opposes the bridge as too costly and hurtful to taxpayers. She favors a smaller, more affordable bridge.

Disappearing dreams?

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the green fields from the St. Croix River east to New Richmond drew thousands of new residents who wanted to live in the country but commute to Minnesota for jobs, shopping and medical services. At the same time, proponents of a new bridge banked on continuing growth as persuasion for a bridge with a far greater capacity than the lift Bridge.

Many of today's tax-delinquent properties, however, are unfilled lots in housing developments, said St. Croix County Treasurer Laurie Noble. In many cases, she said, banks are paying off the debts. The number of sheriff sales of foreclosures grew from 40 in 2003, the first year records were kept, to 828 last year.

Information about who uses the Lift Bridge remains mostly anecdotal. In a windshield survey over two months last year, the Sierra Club counted 75 percent of the crossing vehicles with Wisconsin plates.

Most new residents living in the New Richmond and Somerset areas have strong Minnesota ties and see themselves as part of the greater metro area, said Paul Mayer, who heads the New Richmond Economic Development Corp.

"We are basically a suburb of the Twin Cities," he said. The west-central Wisconsin economy belongs to the greater metro area, businesses support a new bridge, and traffic needs to move efficiently, he said.

Connie Munn drives 43 miles from her home in Somerset to her job in Brooklyn Park. When the Lift Bridge closes for flooding or repairs, her trip stretches to 55 miles when she drives to the I-94 bridge at Hudson. She favors a new bridge, fearing the old one might fall down. She's even willing to pay a toll.

"Our main reason for moving to Somerset was to get more house for the money by crossing the river," said Munn, whose husband, Ken, also commutes across the river to his job. Replacing the Lift Bridge might bring buyers back to struggling housing developments, she said -- and reverse sagging property values.

Another resident, Rebecca Broome, commutes from New Richmond to her job at the Washington County jail. New Richmond is "like a bedroom community for the metro," she said, but sometimes she regrets living there because of traffic backups on the Lift Bridge and the prolonged debate over a new bridge.

"I'm very, very doubtful that it will ever get built," she said.